

Harmony and Disharmony in the Anthracite Coal Fields, 1860s-1877

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For more than a dozen years, dating from before the close of the Civil War, until the gallows and jails put a stop to them, in 1877, a gang of highly toxic individuals, known as the Molly Maguires, terrorized the anthracite coal region of northeastern Pennsylvania (Schuylkill, Carbon, Luzerne, Lackawanna, Columbia and Northumberland counties). This terrorist group, who killed their victims almost entirely for revenge, was an ethno-religious secret society whose members were Irish Catholics and members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians.

In the anthracite coal fields, mine officials, superintendents, and bosses were everywhere and at all times attacked, beaten, and shot down, by day and by night, on the public highways and in their own homes, in solitary places and in the neighborhood of crowds. Any personal slight, reduction in wages, adverse change in working conditions, or imagined grievance against a Molly Maguire could inspire a revengeful house burning or cold-blooded murder. They inflicted horror on police, mine supervisors and owners by blowing up railroad cars full of coal, organizing riots, sending out threats to everyone who spoke out against them.

Each mining village in which the AOH had a presence was regarded as a division/"body", with its own body master, treasurer, secretary, and register of outstanding members/"brethren." (The body master for Schuylkill County was John "Black Jack" Kehoe, also known as "The King of the Mollies." Alexander Campbell was body master of the AOH in the Lansford area.) The divisions met regularly to discuss alleged grievances and to formulate plans of action/retribution (from a beating to a murder).

The Molly Maguires developed a system of reciprocity for their violence. Typically, the body-master of one "district" would ask the body-master of a nearby district to send a team of men over to carry out the murder. (The reciprocal system was designed to make identification of the perpetrators less likely.) The members of the local group would be informed of the time and place of planned-on retribution and would establish air-tight alibis for themselves. These outside hit men would perform the act, and then disappear. Returns of favors granted were regularly granted. After successful completion of a violent mission, assassins usually received a small monetary reward and were treated to a drunken revel.

In A. Monroe Aurand, Jr.'s *HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE MOLLIE MAGUIRES Origin, Depredation and Decay of a Terrorist Secret Organization in the Pennsylvania Coal Fields During and Following the Civil War*, we read: **"Mobs Make Havoc.**—One thousand comprised a motley crew of men who stopped work at several mines near Mahanoy City on July 3, 1875. At Shenandoah the same tactics succeeded in stopping work. The gang nearly derailed a night passenger train at the latter place. At Mount Carmel, a breaker went up in smoke the same night. Two contractors were shot at Oakdale a few days later. These mobs were a constant problem for the railroads, and "for a time an armed posse loaded on a single locomotive preceded every passenger train through the mining districts. Station agents, watchmen, and others were beaten time and again. The main tracks were obstructed with loaded cars; warehouses were plundered; switches were misplaced. It was likely that at every forest or woods and cut along the rail lines

men lay in wait to shoot at passengers as well as trainmen. In those days an engineer had to be good—at driving his locomotive, and at the same time shooting a revolver at sight of a waiting assassin." (*Aurand*, pp. 6-7)

The Molly Maguires, in addition, were instrumental in the draft riots that took place, beginning in the summer of 1862, when the government proposed its first draft for filling up the ranks of the army. In 1864, eleven mine bosses involved in labor disputes of one sort or another were killed in Schuylkill County. In 1865-1866, five more mine managers or bosses were shot and killed in the coal region.

In vain, the officials of the Philadelphia and Reading and Lehigh Valley Railroads, whose lines spread over the entire region, offered thousands of dollars in rewards for the apprehension of the criminals.

In an effort to control and end this reign of terror in the anthracite fields, the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed an act (State Act 228) on February 27, 1865, which empowered the railroads to organize private police forces with broad authority to make arrests and enforce the law. Accordingly, the Coal and Iron Police, a private police force that was employed and paid by the various coal companies, was established. (This private police force existed up to 1931.)

Law enforcement in Pennsylvania at that time (and until 1905) existed only on the county level or below. An elected sheriff was the primary law enforcement officer. The case was made by the coal and iron operators that they required additional protection of their property. In 1866, a supplement to the act was passed extending the privilege to "embrace all corporations, firms, or individuals, owning, leasing, or being in possession of any colliery, furnace, or rolling mill within this commonwealth". The 1866 supplement also stipulated that the words "coal and iron police" appear on their badges. A total of over 7,632 commissions were given for the Coal and Iron Police.

The first Coal and Iron Police were established in Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, under the supervision of the Pinkerton Detective Agency. Although the Coal and Iron Police nominally existed solely to protect property, in practice the companies used them as strikebreakers. The coal miners called them "Cossacks" and "Yellow Dogs". For one dollar each, the state sold to the mine and steel mill owners commissions conferring police power upon whomever the owners selected. Often common gunmen, hoodlums, and adventurers were hired to fill these commissions and they served their own interests by causing the violence and terror that gave them office. The coal and iron police worked with the Pinkertons.

In 1873, Franklin B. Gowen, the president of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, and of the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company, a former District Attorney for Schuylkill County, and "the wealthiest anthracite coal mine owner in the world," met with Benjamin Franklin, superintendent of the Pinkerton Detective Agency in Philadelphia (who reported to the chief of the agency, Allan Pinkerton), and presented the problem to be solved. McGowen, in October 1873, then met with the chief of the Pinkerton Agency, Allan Pinkerton, who agreed to take the case and to infiltrate the Molly Maguires, collect evidence, and cause the downfall of the organization. To do so, Pinkerton chose twenty-nine-year-old James McParland, a young Irishman of phenomenal tact and grit who was born in 1844, a native of the County of Armagh, Province of Ulster, Ireland.

McParland accepted the dangerous job, taking the name of James McKenna and assuming the character of a miner from Colorado who had come east, seeking work in the coal region. He would earn \$12 per week plus expenses and would be required to file daily reports. His orders from Allan Pinkerton were clear: "You are to remain in the field until every cut-throat has paid with his life for the lives so cruelly taken."

On October 27, 1873, McParland, calling himself "James McKenna," arrived in Port Clinton to begin his undercover operation. James McKenna's headquarters were in Shenandoah. McParland successfully infiltrated the secret organization, becoming a secretary for one of its local groups. He also began working secretly with Robert J. Linden, assistant superintendent of the Chicago office of the Pinkerton Agency, who was sent to Shenandoah, where he was appointed by Franklin Gowen as captain in the Philadelphia Coal and Iron Police. Together the two detectives were able (1) to take care of emergencies too big for one man working secretly at great risk to life, and (2) to coordinate the eventual arrest and prosecution of members of the Molly Maguires.

McKenna's true identity and mission were known only to three people: Franklin B. Gowen, Allan Pinkerton, and Captain Robert J. Linden of Philadelphia (to whom McKenna sent daily reports during his 44-month mission).

Molly Maguires, Arrests and Executions: In 1876: McParland completed his mission and withdrew. On February 5, 1876, based on a 210-page confession by "Powderkeg" Kerrigan (the confession identifies members of the Mollys, including the men responsible for the murder of Benjamin Yost), murder warrants were issued for the arrests of 17 Molly Maguires. Arrests were now begun in earnest, and capture followed swiftly upon capture.

In April 1876, McGowen and Pinkerton met with McParland in Philadelphia to find out if he would take the witness stand in the trials that were to follow, even though Pinkerton and McParland had entered into a verbal agreement nearly three years before that McParland, the operative, would not be called upon to go before a court and give testimony. McParland: "I will come out in my true character as a detective, speak the truth in all the cases, wherever needed, and, so help me God, every assistance that I can give shall be rendered! Nothing shall be held back. With God's aid, I may be the means of doing much good!" (*Pinkerton*, p. 505)

Here is Aurand's account (p. 26) of McParland's appearance on the witness stand: "**Court Spectators Dumb-Founded.**—But the audience in the crowded court room could hardly believe that the quiet, gentlemanly cool and resolute witness James McParland, was the wild and reckless, ever-boasting James McKenna they had known! He spell-bound the spectators, and legal array gathered there during the four days he was on the stand, as they had never been in all their years of surprises. / The entire bar of the county was present—they and spectators alike being startled by the terrible revelations of the crimes and methods of the Mollies. Try as they might, the cross-examination failed to find a single flaw in his testimony. / Never before had a Mollie been convicted, but now they were found guilty by the wholesale. McParland as he was now known, was under constant guard, and it was feared he might be killed in the court room to prevent his testifying."

On the very day that McParland appeared on the witness stand, the "ring-leaders" of the Mollies were arrested and committed to jail. About seventy persons were arrested and tried. The judges presiding over the Molly Maguire trials were Cyrus L. Pershing and Judge Greene. Of those arrested: 12 were found guilty of murder in the first degree, 4 of murder in the second degree, 4 of being an accessory to murder, 16 of conspiracy to murder, 6 of perjury, 1 of assault with intent to kill, 8 of aiding and abetting a murder, 1 of assault and battery, 1 for aiding in the escape of a murderer, and several others of lesser crimes.

In the period 1877-1879, twenty Molly Maguires were hung: Martin Bergin, James Boyle, Alexander Campbell, James Carroll, John "Yellow Jack" Donahue, Dennis Donnelly, Michael J. Doyle, Thomas Duffy, Thomas P. Fisher, Pat Hester, Jack Kehoe, Edward Kelly, James "Hairy Man" McDonnell, Hugh McGehan, Peter McHugh, Thomas Munley, James Roarity, Charles Sharpe, Patrick Tully, and Peter McManus.

Michael Doyle (Shenandoah, of the Molly Maguires' Laffee district), charged with the murder of superintendent Jones, an alleged participant in the shooting of William "Bully Bill" Thomas and the murder of Thomas Sanger and William Uren, on February 1, 1876, was convicted of first-degree murder. He fled the anthracite region and was never captured.

Thomas Hurley (AOH secretary), alleged to have killed Gomer James and to have participated in the attempted murder of "Bully Bill" Thomas and James Johns as well as the plans to assassinate Sanger and Uren, fled the anthracite district. In 1876, Thomas Hurley was arrested in Colorado for the murder of James; he committed suicide rather than face trial.

And so the Molly Maguire reign of terror in northeastern Pennsylvania came to an end, and harmony was restored in the anthracite coal fields.

(End of Part 5 of *Harmony and Disharmony in the Anthracite Coal Fields*.)

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